

Shorter Features

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The Shorter Features department serves as a forum for sharply focused archival topics which may not require a full-length article. Members of the Society and others knowledgeable in areas of archival interest are encouraged to submit papers for consideration. Shorter Features should range from 500 to 1,000 words in length and contain no annotation. Papers should be sent to Christopher Beam, Shorter Features Editor, the *American Archivist*, National Archives and Records Service (NNFD), Washington, DC 20408.

The Orientation Interview in Archival Research

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The orientation interview with the researcher is one of the most important parts of archival reference. Because the successful utilization of a repository's holdings largely depends on the thoroughness and effectiveness of the reference interview, most archives require an initial meeting between a staff member and the researcher before the researcher is allowed to work with the holdings. The interview thus is the basic means of obtaining essential information about the specific needs of the researcher and enables the archives staff to familiarize the researcher with the rules of the institution. It is important

because users of an archives are far more dependent on the institution's staff than are, for example, the patrons of a library. Anyone entering a library can within minutes become familiar with the floor plan of the building, find the card catalog, determine the type of classification system used, and locate information on open shelves—all with minimum assistance from the staff. Patrons of an archives, on the other hand, are likely to find that it takes much longer to become familiar with the holdings and inner workings of the repository. This is because most archives do not have a universal classification system and

because their storage areas are closed to patrons to protect the documents from theft, to minimize mishandling, and to ensure integrity of arrangement. Thus, to obtain the documents necessary for his research the researcher must depend on the archivist to explain the facilities, finding aids, and records of the specific institution.

Representatives from the following twelve institutions were consulted in an effort to draw up some guidelines for conducting orientation interviews: National Archives and Records Service (Reference Service Branch), Fort Worth Federal Records Center, Franklin D. Roosevelt Library, Herbert Hoover Library, Harry S. Truman Library, Dwight D. Eisenhower Library, John F. Kennedy Library, Episcopal Church Archives at the Theological Seminary of the Southwest, Texas Collection at Baylor University, E.C. Baker Texas History Center and the Humanities Research Center at The University of Texas at Austin, and the Texas State Library and Archives. The staff member responsible for researcher orientation was asked eleven questions. Eight of the questions dealt with various aspects of the procedures for the orientation interview, another was concerned with reference procedures and staffing in the research or reading room, and the other two dealt with the exit interview and the makeup of questionnaires for the researchers.

According to the survey, orientation interviews are conducted in a variety of locations, some in the research room itself and others in rooms used specifically for interviews. Ideally the interview should be conducted in a room free of distractions. This situation provides an atmosphere that allows the researcher to feel free to discuss his topic of research and his information needs. In this controlled setting the archivist can exchange information with the researcher without

being interrupted by other duties. This procedure encourages the fast and effective dissemination of information.

Who should interview the potential user? Generally, the interviewer should be an experienced staff member who is familiar with all the holdings of the repository and who can communicate effectively with prospective researchers, elicit from the user a clear idea of the scope of his research, and determine the records and finding aids that may be useful. In some cases, this "superarchivist" may direct the researcher to a staff member who specializes in or is familiar with the pertinent records. This specialist can either join the interview immediately or meet with the user later. According to the survey results, use of specialized staff largely depends on the degree of specialization within the staff. At five institutions another archivist routinely entered the reference process after the interview; however, four reported that another archivist was not consulted at all. The remaining three facilities stated that on occasion a specialist would enter the reference process after the initial interview had ended.

The survey revealed that despite the unique characteristics of each repository, certain standard questions must be asked of each new researcher in order to provide good reference service and, at the same time, essential information about the institution. According to the survey, none of the twelve institutions used a structured interview in which the interviewing archivist consulted a checklist of specific questions. Instead, the interviewer conducted a very informal interview. In an effort to standardize the orientation interview, a basic guide or checklist for the interview has been formulated and can be employed at any archival facility. The structured interview described below and outlined at the end of this article provides standardized information to each researcher and at the

same time collects essential data from the researcher.

Even before the potential user fills out his application, the archivist must determine if the facility contains the records the researcher desires. For example, the Lyndon B. Johnson Library has received visitors who in fact should use the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs Library, which contains only published material, or who need a published work that could be found in the Austin Public Library or the Texas State Library and Archives.

After the interviewing archivist has determined that his facility is indeed the appropriate one, the researcher is asked to complete an application form. All twelve institutions surveyed require the researcher to fill out a form. Even though the form may vary with each institution, the information requested is generally the same: name, permanent and temporary addresses, institutional affiliation (university, firm, or agency), position (e.g., M.A. or Ph.D. candidate for a graduate student; rank for a faculty member), scope and topic of study, expected length of stay at the repository, and publication plans. The application may also contain a statement asking the researcher's permission for release of his name and topic to other researchers to avoid possible duplication of topics.

Almost all of the representatives contacted stated that the length and scope of the interview often depended upon the researcher's experience in an archives. If a researcher has never used archival materials, then the archivist must explain the nature of an archival repository, some of the terminology employed, and the arrangement and description of the materials. If the researcher has worked in other archival facilities, then the archivist usually only needs to comment about the arrangement and description of the materials in

the specific repository.

The next step in the interview process is to explain the regulations of the facility. In over half of the institutions contacted, the regulations are read by the researcher and are explained by a staff member. If the user has never worked with archival materials, then the archivist must carefully go over all of the regulations. If the patron has such experience, then the archivist only has the responsibility of reiterating the basic rules, emphasizing those that may be unique to the specific institution. In eleven of the twelve facilities contacted, the researcher is asked to sign a statement that he has read and will abide by these regulations. At this point in the interview, the archivist should describe the research or reading room procedures. If a register is maintained, then the researcher must sign it each day he enters the research room. He will then be reminded that only essential items may be taken to the research tables. Storage facilities are usually available for inessential personal belongings.

Most archives have a request slip that the researcher must complete and present to the reading room attendant. Upon receiving the requested material, the researcher usually must sign a receipt for the items so that an accurate account of the records provided may be maintained. This information is usually recorded on a reference service report, which the researcher and archivist may examine to find out if a complete search for the materials has been made.

The archivist should make the researcher aware that he may encounter administrative or processing notes in the files. For instance, the Presidential Libraries of the National Archives and Records Service insert a withdrawal sheet when a document is removed from the files. The withdrawal sheet contains information on the format of the docu-

ment removed, correspondents or title, date of the item, and the class of restriction. On the basis of this information a researcher may request a re-review of donor-restricted items, mandatory review for possible declassification of security-restricted documents, or access to federal records through the Freedom of Information Act. The appropriate procedure for gaining access to these records should be carefully explained when the researcher presents his request.

The interviewing archivist should outline the photoduplication procedures of the institution. Some facilities do not allow the researcher to make his own copies. A detailed explanation of the procedures for copying materials should not be made, however, until the researcher makes his first request, since it is usually easier to describe the procedure with a document submitted by the researcher as an example. The researcher should also be informed if typewriters and tape recorders may be used in the reading room and if the repository provides such equipment.

After reviewing the rules, the archivist should describe the various materials in the repository and the procedures for locating needed items. This explanation should include information about textual records, audiovisual materials, and museum items. Since most storage areas are closed to patrons, the researcher must rely on published or in-house finding aids. The interviewing archivist should explain the different finding aids and the ways to use them effectively and should also point out those finding aids and materials that deal specifically with the researcher's topic.

After explaining the holdings, the interviewing archivist should discuss the recommended format for citing materials. Proper footnote citation is extremely important in identifying the item used and its location and will enable the staff

to locate the document for the researcher who wishes to see it again or for other researchers who may ask to see it. A citation should include:

1. Format of document—letter, memorandum, report, etc.
2. Names of the author and the addressee of correspondence or of the report.
3. Date of the item.
4. Folder title and container number.
5. Title of the manuscript collection or record group.
6. Name of the repository.

The next step in the orientation interview is a brief description of the floor plan of the building, especially the location of restrooms, water fountains, lounge areas, and food service areas. The location of nearby restaurants might also be helpful to the new researcher.

If the institution has a program providing grants-in-aid for research, then the interviewing archivist should provide the researcher with an application and briefly explain the procedures for obtaining such funds. The interviewer may also request a copy of the researcher's final product so that the institution can determine what collections have been utilized and, at the same time, acquire the latest works based on its sources.

Finally, the archivist should solicit questions from the researcher about the points covered in the interview. Since the researcher has been exposed to a large quantity of information and probably some unfamiliar terminology, the archivist should reiterate that the reading room archivist's primary responsibility is to help the researcher unearth needed materials.

The survey revealed that nine of the twelve institutions do not conduct exit interviews, while the other three facilities hold very informal ones. Exit

interviews can be very valuable in eliciting candid comments about procedures, arrangement and description of materials, finding aids, and staff competence. To aid future users, the departing researcher might be asked about the existence of other manuscript collections, records, and oral history interviews in other repositories that would complement the institution's holdings. If an exit interview is not feasible, then the research facility might provide the researcher with a questionnaire to be submitted before his departure, although none of the surveyed institutions do so at present.

The importance of the initial interview cannot be overemphasized. As an integral procedure in an archival institution, the orientation interview collects essential data from the researcher and establishes a basis for understanding, cooperation, and the effective transfer of information between archivist and researcher. The survey clearly demonstrates the lack of standardization and total reliance on the individual interviewer to transmit and receive vital information. The thoroughness and effectiveness of the interview can be greatly enhanced by the following guide or checklist.

Basic Guide for the Orientation Interview

1. Type of research:
 - a. If your institution contains the appropriate materials for research, proceed with the interview.
 - b. If your facility is not needed, direct the individual to other institutions.
3. Application form:
 - a. Have researcher fill out the form completely.
 - b. Check over the form for omissions.
3. Researcher card:
 - a. Issue card or explain how it will be issued.
 - b. Explain how long the card will be valid.
4. Hours of operation:
 - a. Explain your normal hours of operation.
 - b. Explain if your hours vary for weekends and holidays.
5. Research experience in archives:
 - a. If none, explain your rules and regulations in detail and provide the researcher with a list of these.
 - b. If yes, briefly emphasize those rules and regulations that apply to your facility.
6. Reading room procedures:
 - a. Ask that the researcher sign the reading room register once each day and bring only essential items to the desk. Explain that other items will be locked in a cabinet, and that those items taken to the desk will be subject to search upon leaving the reading room.
 - b. Explain that all archival materials will be brought directly to the researcher.
 - c. Explain the procedure for requesting materials.

- d. Explain administrative or processing notes that may be found in the collections of papers.
 - e. Explain the photocopying procedure.
7. Equipment in the reading room:
 - a. Explain if typewriters, tape recorders, or cameras can be used.
 - b. Explain the use of any machines in the reading room, such as microfilm readers or computer terminals.
 8. Types of materials:
 - a. Explain the types of materials in your holdings.
 - b. Describe the types of finding aids and card catalogs.
 9. Floor plan of the building:
 - a. Describe the location of research or reading room, restrooms, and water fountains.
 - b. Describe the location of lounge areas, food service areas, and nearby restaurants.
 10. Grant-in-aid of research:

If available, explain the forms and deadline.
 11. Final product of the researcher:

Request a copy of the researcher's final product for the files.
 12. Exit interview and/or questionnaire:

Explain the purpose of the exit interview and/or the questionnaire.
 13. Conclusion:
 - a. Ask the researcher if he has any questions about what has been covered.
 - b. Advise the researcher that if he has any questions in future, he should ask the reading room archivist.